Henry Hancock's 1858 Plat of the Ballona Rancho

“Inner Bay”: What It Meant

Rev. 1.26
Sources: Plat of the Ballona Rancho, Henry Hancock, surveyor, 1858, verified October 1863. Huntington Digital Library, Solano-Reeve Collection, Call No. mssSolano SR_Box_25(10).03, Unique Digital Identifier 20895. Field Notes of the Final Survey of the Rancho La Ballona, Henry Hancock, Deputy Surveyor, surveyed July 14 to 19, 1858, sworn July 23, 1858, certified true copy by Theo. Wagner, U.S. Surveyor General for California, Feb. 17, 1882, Field Notes Book G5-23, Vol. 199 p. 585.

The Question

What did Henry Hancock mean by “Inner Bay” on his 1858 survey plat of Rancho La Ballona?

Headline Finding

Hancock answered this question himself, under oath, in his own field notes. In the Remarks section, dated July 19 to 23, 1858, he wrote:

“The inner bay may very properly be styled, an interior lake, for as previously stated, in the foregoing notes, the connection with the sea is often obstructed.”

This is not a later interpretation, a legal filing, or a subsequent map classification. It is the surveyor who walked the ground, in his own contemporaneous sworn statement, clarifying what he meant by the label used on his own plat and stating the reason: the connection between the inner bay and the ocean was often obstructed. This is the primary basis for the historical characterization below; Drummond's 1863 to 1864 determination and the 1924 USGS classification are corroborating, not load bearing, evidence.

The Geography

The plat distinguishes three separate physical elements: Shoalwater Bay of the Pacific Ocean along the outer coastal margin; a narrow intervening sand and dune barrier; and, landward of that barrier, the enclosed water body labeled “Inner Bay.” The map therefore does not use “Inner Bay” as another name for the open Pacific embayment; it shows Inner Bay as a distinct interior lagoon or back bay feature set off from Shoalwater Bay by the barrier itself. The map therefore depicts two distinct water bodies separated by a barrier, rather than a single uninterrupted embayment extending inland from the Pacific Ocean.

The plat distinguishes between the location where Ballona Creek discharges into the Inner Bay and the separate opening through the barrier that connects the Inner Bay with Shoalwater Bay of the Pacific Ocean, on opposite sides of the bay. On the inland side of Inner Bay, Hancock labels the point where Ballona Creek enters the bay as the “Outlet of Ballona Creek.” Separately, on the southwest side, the map shows a narrow opening through the barrier between Inner Bay and Shoalwater Bay. These two features should not be conflated.

The field notes corroborate this structure directly. Hancock's traverse describes leaving the shore of the bay, entering sand hills eight to ten chains wide extending far northwesterly, reaching the east shore of an inlet, and then, because the inlet was too wide to chain directly, traversing and calculating its width by triangulation: course and distance south 45 degrees 9 minutes west, 8.21 chains, to the west shore of the inlet. From there the line runs to a station marked at high water mark on shoal water bay of the Pacific Ocean. This sequence, bay, sand hills, inlet, high water

mark on the ocean, matches the plat's three part structure exactly, and the 8.21 chain figure (about 542 feet) demonstrates that Hancock encountered and surveyed a substantial inlet crossing in July 1858, not a dry gap.

Near the close of the traverse, Hancock also records crossing a stream of water 18 links wide, skirted with sycamore timber, course southwest, at 11.50 chains into the final course back to Station 1, followed by a road crossing at 18.50 chains, the base of hills some 300 feet high at the edge of the timber, and Station No. 1, the place of beginning, at 33.81 chains, completing the survey July 19, 1858. This is a separate, physically chained stream crossing near the end of the survey, associated with the Ballona drainage. Absent a step by step reconstruction tying this specific crossing to the creek outlet point shown on the plat, it is described here as a stream crossing in the Ballona drainage rather than categorically identified as the creek's mouth; it is in any case distinct from the earlier reference near Station 10, where Hancock only notes the creek's discharge point by bearing and estimated distance (“at about 100 chains the Ballona Creek discharges itself into the bay”) without physically crossing it there.

The Answer

In the running survey text, Hancock uses only “bay” and, once, “Ballona Bay” for this feature; “Inner Bay” appears on the plat and, once, in the closing Remarks, where he states it “may very properly be styled, an interior lake.” He did not rename the feature outright; he stated it could properly be so styled, and gave his reason. The term functions as a descriptive geographic label, and Hancock's own qualification of it shows he did not intend it as a technical classification of hydrologic connectivity.

The 1839 Mexican grant of Rancho La Ballona does not identify this feature using the Spanish geographic terms “bahía,” “laguna,” or “estero.” Accordingly, “Inner Bay” is best understood as Hancock's own English-language cartographic label applied during the 1858 federal patent survey, rather than a translation of an earlier Mexican designation.

What the Inner Bay Actually Was

The map label itself does not establish the feature's salinity, tidal regime, permanence, or navigability, but Hancock's own field notes speak to this directly, and are corroborated by two independent later sources:

- Hancock's own Remarks, July 1858: the inner bay is properly an interior lake because its connection with the sea is often obstructed.
- GLO Commissioner Willis Drummond, 1863 to 1864 patent approval determination: found the Inner Bay was not an arm of the sea, based on affidavits describing the area as dry land used for pasturage, flooded only during storms and high water when sand blocked the mouth of the creek that fed it.
- USGS Venice Quadrangle, 1924 (24,000 scale): classifies the same footprint as freshwater marsh, consistent with both of the above.

A Note on the Plat's Structure

Hancock's plat explicitly distinguishes three separate elements: the Shoalwater Bay of the Pacific Ocean (the outer, oceanic bay); the intervening sand barrier; and the Inner Bay (the enclosed, landward water body). This three part distinction is an objective feature of the plat itself, and is independently corroborated by the field notes' own station by station traverse. The plat depicts the Inner Bay as a distinct enclosed water body with an irregular shoreline and shallow embayments, separate from the Shoalwater Bay of the Pacific Ocean, consistent with a sheltered lagoon or back bay morphology rather than a simple open embayment. One additional cartographic feature is noteworthy. The plat also depicts an elongated sand or dune landform separating the inlet from part of the larger Inner Bay to the north. This interpretation, that the landform functioned as a dune barrier, is independently corroborated by the Rancho La Ballona Map (1876), CSLA-11, hand drawn by surveyors George Hansen and Alfredo Solano, which similarly shows a dune barrier landform at this location, rather than open water or marsh. Later Ballona literature has sometimes treated “Inner Bay” as though it were simply another name for the open coastal embayment; neither the map nor the field notes support that reading.

Bottom Line

With “Shoalwater Bay of the Pacific Ocean” understood as the open coastal embayment (modern Santa Monica Bay), Hancock's “Inner Bay” refers to the sheltered water body lying landward of the intervening sand barrier, distinguishing the enclosed back bay from the open Pacific bay outside it. The label itself is descriptive and geographic; it does not by itself establish salinity, tidal regime, navigability, or legal status.

Hancock's own sworn field notes, corroborated by Drummond's 1863 to 1864 patent approval determination and the 1924 USGS freshwater marsh classification of the same footprint, strongly support the interpretation that, by the patent era and again as reflected in 1924, the feature was primarily a seasonal, largely non-tidal lagoon, a feature Hancock stated “may very properly be styled, an interior lake,” subject to episodic storm and high water breaching, rather than a continuously tidal estuarine embayment. This is the weight of the evidence, not a claim that intermittent tidal influence under barrier breach conditions is ruled out entirely.

Evidentiary Status

Category: Supported. Seasonal, largely non-tidal lagoon with episodic storm and high water overflow, per Hancock's own contemporaneous characterization.

Definition of “Supported” as used here: preponderance of the available evidence favors this interpretation. It is not a claim of certainty beyond reasonable doubt, and it does not exclude the possibility of intermittent tidal influence under barrier breach or high mouth conditions in particular years.

Quotable Summary (For Reuse)

A short, self contained version of this finding, suitable for reuse as a footnote or parenthetical elsewhere without repeating the full document:

“Hancock's ‘Inner Bay’ refers to the sheltered water body lying landward of the sand and dune barrier, an interior lake or lagoon whose connection with the sea was ‘often obstructed’ in Hancock's own sworn field notes. The weight of the evidence supports the interpretation that it was primarily a seasonal, largely non-tidal lagoon with episodic storm and high water overflow, rather than a continuously tidal estuarine embayment.”

The traverse detail in the field notes (chain lengths, compass courses, and the high water mark stations) is retained above rather than trimmed, since it anchors this interpretation in survey mechanics rather than in the map label alone, and is the kind of primary source detail that would support a future hydrology or geomorphology annex.

References

Map Provenance

Hancock, Henry, surveyor. Plat of the Ballona Rancho (alt. title: Rancho Sausal Redondo: S85, Plat of the Ballona Rancho). 1858, verified October 1863. Manuscript map, hand colored, ink on tracing cloth, 12 by 14 in. on a 16.5 by 16 in. sheet, scale 1:40 chains. Solano-Reeve Collection, Huntington Library, Call No. mssSolano SR_Box_25(10).03, Unique Digital Identifier 20895.
Huntington Digital Library catalog record: hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p15150coll4/id/11314/rec/73
Huntington library catalog entry: catalog.huntington.org/record=b1552510

Field Notes Provenance

Hancock, Henry, Deputy Surveyor. Field Notes of the Final Survey of the Rancho La Ballona. Surveyed July 14 to 19, 1858, sworn July 23, 1858. Certified true copy by Theo. Wagner, U.S. Surveyor General for California, Feb. 17,

1882. Field Notes Book G5-23, Vol. 199, p. 585, Townships 1 to 2 South, Ranges 14 and 15 West, San Bernardino Meridian.

Public Access. A digitized copy of the certified transcript is now publicly available through the Internet Archive: archive.org/details/ca-G0005page0298to0314_23

Short citation form (for footnote or in-text use): Hancock, Field Notes of the Final Survey of the Rancho La Ballona (Internet Archive, ca-G0005page0298to0314_23).

Provenance. The certified typed transcript is the earliest known surviving version of Hancock's field notes. The original manuscript survey field books were destroyed in the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire. The certified transcript derives from federal survey records preserved in Washington, D.C., and later maintained by the Bureau of Land Management. Prior to its Internet Archive publication, Book G5-23 was not available through the GLO Records website and was obtained directly from the BLM California State Office, Survey Records, Sacramento, California (casurveyrecords@blm.gov, 916-978-4330), through correspondence conducted between 2020 and 2024. Separately, BLM Survey Records confirms that Hancock's and Washington's township and range line surveys (Books 172-6 and 172-16) established the Township and Range grid only, and that no section surveys were made inside the land grant boundary; the Rancho La Ballona land grant boundary survey (this field notes book) was a distinct, separate survey.

Other Sources

USGS. Venice, CA topographic quadrangle, 24,000 scale, 1924. USGS Store product 847033: store.usgs.gov/product/847033

Hansen, George, and Alfredo Solano, surveyors. Rancho La Ballona Map. 1876. Hand drawn map on linen cloth, 64 by 31 in. Department of Archives and Special Collections, William H. Hannon Library, Loyola Marymount University, Call No. CSLA-11.
Finding aid: oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/kt258035h8

Figures

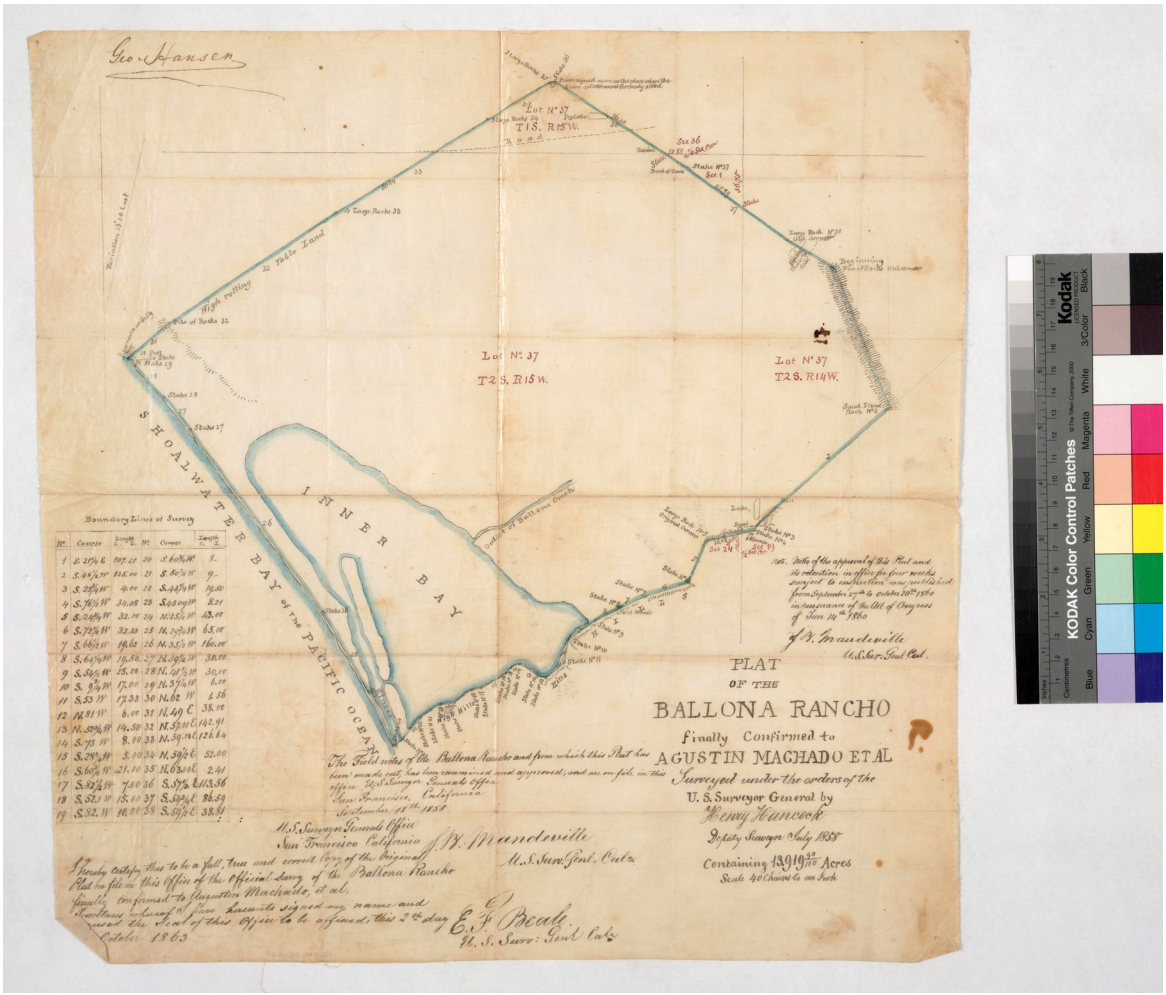

Figure 1. Plat of the Ballona Rancho, Henry Hancock, Deputy Surveyor, 1858, verified October 1863. Huntington Digital Library, Solano-Reeve Collection, Call No. mssSolano SR_Box_25(10).03, Unique Digital Identifier 20895.

Figure 2. Detail of the Inlet and the northern portion of Inner Bay, from the same plat, showing the elongated sand or dune landform (center) separating the Inlet (labeled, lower right) from part of the larger Inner Bay to the north. Compare Stakes 20, 24, and 25 and the traverse discussion above.